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# EPA addresses Rico's toxin woes

## Lead cleanup called 'manageable'

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RICO — Federal Environmental Protection Agency officials tried to calm fears surrounding plans for cleaning up toxic lead and reassured residents at a town meeting Friday that the problem is "most manageable."

EPA Region 8 Assistant Administrator Max Dodson said the problem would be solved hand-in-hand with the community and the state government, but he did not rule out any cleanup approaches available to the agency under the toughest environmental laws.

"The good news is that it is only lead we are dealing with ... and not arsenic," Dodson said.

Dodson said any cleanup would be done expeditiously and with sensitivity toward the goals of the town.

Rico, a silver-mining relic southwest of Telluride working hard to reinvent itself as a haven for outdoor enthusiasts, reacted strongly last month to the EPA's first alarm about mining-related lead contamination. Town officials said then that any designation of Rico as a Superfund site or target for other severe action under the Comprehensive Environment Response, Compensation and Liability Act could be the death knell for its tentative economic recovery.

Dodson said he came to Rico on Friday to ease concerns that EPA action would hinder the town's many endeavors to improve its prospects and slowly increase its population of 220.

Rico Town Manager Ashton Harrison said his fears were largely allayed by Friday's talk.

"I feel like the EPA is supportive of us doing a cooperative approach with other stakeholders," Harrison said.

Only preliminary results were available from EPA soil testing

done this fall under Superfund assessment procedures. The EPA took samples from 58 Rico properties, of which 40 were residential yards. The town board had denied permission for testing of its streets.

Site Assessment Manager Luke Chavez said lead concentrations ranged from nondetectable to 91,000 parts per million — a startlingly high level. Levels as low as 300 ppm have triggered cleanups to protect public health, he said.

EPA officials said the agency still must determine the health risk the lead poses. The threat to humans from a given level of lead varies, depending on where it is found, what form it takes and how much humans are exposed to it.

Lead can accumulate in body tissues over time and can cause high blood pressure, an inability to absorb vitamin D, decreased kidney function and damage to the nervous system. Young children are especially susceptible.

Final test results could be available in mid- to late January. The agency will then decide what cleanup approach to take, Dodson said.

Town Attorney Eric Heil said the town is concerned about lead levels in soils but was caught off guard by what seemed to be sudden EPA action for two reasons: The town had asked for immediate help in treating the Dolores River, which is being contaminated by lead, zinc, copper and cadmium from an old mining tunnel. EPA action on that has been very slow. And, he said, federal and state officials have known about private data on high lead in Rico since the mid-1990s, but nothing much was said or done, to his knowledge.

"River-corridor restoration is our bread and butter, our heart and soul," Heil said. "The issue of lead in town streets came at us a little too quick and a little out of the blue."